



*From “Wetland Program Development Grants (WPDGs) Case Studies”  
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**Montana Department of Environmental Quality:** *Building a Legacy program to encourage voluntary conservation activities that allow for greater protection of wetland resources*

**Introduction**

The Montana Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) leads the wetland protection program for the State of Montana in collaboration with other state, tribal and federal agencies and non-governmental organizations. Since 1997, MDEQ has actively administered and coordinated EPA WPDGs to increase state and local governments' capacity to protect and better manage wetland resources. A major challenge is to coordinate the many entities working on wetlands toward a common goal. MDEQ created the Montana Wetland Council as a forum that promotes cooperative wetland resource management in Montana. It operates with open, inclusive membership inviting all interests to participate including agriculture, conservation, consultants, federal government, land trusts, local government, industry, real estate/development, recreation/sportsman, hunters/anglers, state government, tribal government, non-governmental organizations and universities.

The Council developed a Conservation Strategy for Montana's Wetlands with the agreed upon purpose to “establish a framework to guide and facilitate the protection, conservation and management of Montana's wetlands for present and future generations in partnership with private landowners, federal, tribal, state and local governments, economic interests and conservation organizations.”

MDEQ used WPDGs to develop the Conservation Strategy and incorporate priority actions identified in the Strategy. The Strategy identified the following as Montana's wetland goal: “... to build a wetland conservation program to achieve no overall net loss of Montana's remaining wetland base, in terms of quantity and quality, to conserve, restore, enhance and create wetlands where feasible and to increase Montana's wetland resource base.” Three main objectives were identified by the Council and stakeholders as priority items necessary in order to achieve Montana's wetland goal:

- 1) Improve the wetlands knowledge base by completing a wetland inventory for Montana;
- 2) Provide resources to support wetland protection – information, education, technical assistance and funding; and
- 3) Encourage voluntary conservation on private land.

**WPDG Activity**

The Montana Wetlands Legacy was created in 2000, primarily to address the third objective of the Conservation Strategy, voluntary conservation. It was modeled after a successful Colorado Wetland Initiative and used WPDG grant funds to organize the

Legacy. In 2001, a WPDG provided seed funding to the Legacy as an independent program within the Montana Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks (DFWP). The Legacy is now self-supporting and has achieved its first 5-year goal of protecting 250,000 acres of ecologically important wetlands, riparian areas and associated uplands by the year 2005. The Legacy works with the Montana Watershed Education Network, the Montana Watercourse, local educators and other organized groups to describe the value of wetland and riparian conservation and to share information with people on how to begin conservation projects on their lands or in their watershed. The 2005 Montana Wetland Stewardship Award was presented to Tom Hinz, Montana Wetlands Legacy Coordinator, in recognition of the valuable contribution and success of Legacy Partners in achieving their shared goal.

Restoration needs and prioritization of wetlands and associated uplands to be protected are identified through several simultaneous processes the Legacy helps to coordinate. These include: developing North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant proposals in priority watersheds; working with watershed groups to find funding for on-the-ground protection; and working with statewide partners such as Natural Resources Conservation Service to implement new programs. One such program is the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, which prioritizes conservation of wetlands and riparian areas along a 540-mile reach of the Madison and Missouri Rivers. These various prioritization processes help frame where the Legacy works to complete projects and assist with raising funds.

The Montana Wetlands Legacy strives to be a point of contact for anyone interested in conserving wetlands, riparian areas and other watershed lands in Montana. Overall, wetland and riparian conservation project emphasis for the Legacy reflects priorities and program goals of all the major partners, creating a statewide effort with localized areas where funds are more available than in areas without particular partner interest. Rapidly developing areas and regions with an abundance of high functioning wetlands and riparian resources are much more likely to receive Legacy focus than arid parts of Montana with few partners and limited wetland resources. Tracking, reporting and evaluation are done primarily through a web-based database developed by the Montana Natural Heritage Program. Although it requires resources to update, the database provides a framework for partners to track their collective accomplishments. As is true across most of the county, MDEQ continues to be concerned about restoration effectiveness. The state lacks an independent program to consistently evaluate and follow up on wetland restoration methods and success so this is an area of program growth that Montana is working to further develop and fund.

### **Current Work and Future Plans**

In 2005, Montana applied for a three-year grant under EPA's Environmental Outcome Wetland Demonstration Pilot to develop a process to track net loss and net gain of wetlands for three pilot watersheds in Montana. This grant will help track progress toward Legacy partner goals. In addition to the 250,000 acres already protected, partners aim to restore, protect or enhance approximately 30,000 acres of wetlands (primarily emergent and scrub-shrub wetlands), 30,000 acres of riparian areas and 90,000 acres of

uplands contributing run-off and recharge to these riparian and wetland areas. Most of this will be accomplished through conservation easements or fee title acquisition, as opposed to short-term lease or cooperative agreements with landowners.

This goal was established by the Legacy and is the result of collaboration and joint goal setting by the major partners in the Legacy (approximately 30 federal, state and private conservation agencies and organizations). Strategic plans that support this level of conservation are drafted and implemented by each partner; e.g. The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, Blackfoot Challenge\* and others. The partners' pursuit of their strategic plan goals allows the Legacy partnership to show collective progress in the cumulative total acreage protected. It is through the Legacy that these partners consolidate their annual conservation goals and will achieve the acreage figures the partnership has committed to protect.

Please visit Montana's Wetland Legacy website (<http://www.wetlandslegacy.org/>) for more information about how Legacy is working to protect and restore wetland and riparian habitats. The Montana Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) Wetlands Conservation website (<http://www.deq.state.mt.us/wqinfo/Wetlands/Index.asp>) has additional resources on how MDEQ coordinates and provides leadership to wetland conservation activities.

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\* Landowner group coordinating management of the Blackfoot watershed